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THE FORGED™

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ISSUE 003

THE FORGED™

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For centuries, all of known space has been
the realm of **Her Eternal Majesty, the Empress.**

Elite teams of soldiers, **THE FORGED**, serve Her
with fierce loyalty and total determination. Cloned from
the Empress's genetic template, these women–armed and armored with
devastating weaponry and technology–are the ultimate
extension of Imperial will.

One such team, Scimitar-3, has been dispatched
to a remote and inhospitable world, **GEHENNA D-54-C**, to recover a lost
probe's flight recorder. This task was revealed to be a lie, and their
support ship–the Imperial Starfortress **HER ENDLESS RADIANT
TRIUMPH**–crashed to the surface shortly after the mission began.

Instead of a downed probe, the team–led by **VICTORY**, and
accompanied by heavy weapons trooper **CRAZYJO**, sharpshooter
HARPO, medic **PUSHER**, and combat engineer **HAP**–discovered a
downed Imperial courier vessel and signs that a survivor had fled to an
abandoned terraforming facility nearby.

Hidden within the installation was a **CASSANDRA**–a precog and
telepath who, like the **FORGED** themselves, is also a clone of Her
Majesty. The **FORGED** team has never encountered a **CASSANDRA** in
the field, yet–following a strange meeting aboard the **TRIUMPH**–this
mission has involved **TWO** of these mysterious emissaries of
Her Most Exalted Highness.

After pitched battle with uncountable hordes of local megafauna, the
team is weary and their warsuits badly damaged...and the
CASSANDRA has additional bad news:

Their enemy is not the savage monsters that have plagued
them since their arrival on **GEHENNA.**

Their true foe is an alien menace that brought down the **RADIANT**: the
Empire's first contact with a sentient alien species...and it wants them
all **DEAD.**

THE ACHERON REACH

RIGHT, LOCK IT DOWN...

PLANET: GEHENNA D-54-C

...HAP, SEE WHAT YOU CAN GET FROM THE SITE COMPUTERS...

AL-ASHANTI TERRAFORMING INSTALLATION 2-8-3

...MAPS, SCHEMATICS, COMMS ACCESS, ANYTHING WE CAN USE...

MISSION STATUS: FUCKED.

...REST OF YOU, SET A PERIMETER AND DIG IN.

AND I'LL TELL YOU THIS...

...I'M ABOUT DONE WITH THE *SURPRISES* ON THIS OP.

DAMMIT, JO, WOULD YOU *FUCKING* HOLD *STILL?*

NO. I HATE *NEEDLES*, YOU KNOW THAT, PUSH.

YOU WERE BRED TO BE ADAPTABLE, VICTORY.

YEAH. WHAT RANK DO YOU HOLD?

YOU KNOW VERY WELL THAT CASSANDRAS ARE NOT PART OF THE MILITARY CHAIN OF COMMAND.

THAT'S RIGHT. WHICH MEANS *I'M* IN CHARGE AND *YOU* NEED TO *SHUT UP* NOW.

HARPO! TALK TO ME ABOUT THE STUFF OUR NEW FRIEND HERE ARRANGED FOR US.

FULL AMMUNITION RESUPPLY FOR EACH ARMOR PER MISSION PROFILE, PLUS CONSUMABLES AND ADDITIONAL POWER CELLS.

THREE CASES OF EXPLOSIVES AND GRENADES, INCLUDING ONE EXPERIMENTAL WEAPONS PACK FOR SCOUT-SNIPER.

RELAY: I DIG OUR NEW FRIEND'S TASTE.

IF YOU'RE DONE BEING IN CHARGE FOR THE MOMENT, I NEED YOU TO LISTEN TO ME NOW.

WE ARE ON A CLOCK HERE, ONE YOU CANNOT POSSIBLY BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND.

KONNNG KONNNG

I UNDERSTAND THE PART WHERE YOU SAID SOMETHING WAS COMING TO ***KILL*** US ALL.

WHICH MEANS MY MISSION IS NOW TO ***PROTECT*** YOU FROM THE TOOTHY FUCKERS OUTSIDE.

AS I SAID BEFORE, THE TOOTHY FUCKERS OUTSIDE ARE NOT THE THREAT.

THE THREAT WILL REVEAL ITSELF IN...

...SEVEN MINUTES AND TWENTY-THREE SECONDS.

NICE THEY MADE AN APPOINTMENT.

YOU KNOW I AM RIGHT. YOU DO NOT KNOW ***HOW*** YOU KNOW, BUT YOU ***DO.***

LET ME ***SHOW*** YOU WHY.

THE OTHER CASSANDRA...DID SOMETHING TO ME...

SHE LEFT A PIECE OF HERSELF BEHIND. A MESSAGE OF SORTS.

THINK OF IT AS OUR ITINERARY.

EVERYTHING THAT IS TO HAPPEN ***MUST*** HAPPEN AT THE ***CORRECT*** MOMENT AND IN ITS ***PROPER*** ORDER.

ACTION AND REACTION INTERCONNECTED, GEARS TURNING AND MESHING, PROPELLING US FROM ONE INSTANT TO THE NEXT...

...***THIS*** IS HOW THE UNIVERSE WORKS.

THAT WHICH MUST HAPPEN ***MUST*** HAPPEN.

IF IT DOES ***NOT***...

...ALL IS LOST TO DARKNESS.

...WHAT DID SHE...WHAT DID **YOU**...DO TO ME?

SHOWED YOU THE UNIVERSE AS **WE** CAN SEE IT.

YOU DO NOT UNDERSTAND. THAT IS NATURAL. WERE YOU CAPABLE OF FEAR, YOU WOULD BE TERRIFIED BY JUST **THAT** VIEW THROUGH THE WINDOW.

BUT YOU **KNOW** YOU CAN BELIEVE ME.

IF NOTHING ELSE, VICTORY, YOU MUST RECOGNIZE THE POWER OF HAVING A **PRECOG** WHO KNOWS WHAT WILL OCCUR DOWN TO THE MILLISECOND IN YOUR ARSENAL.

HAP IS ABOUT TO TELL YOU SOMETHING.

HUH...

...BOSS!

GOT SOMETHING!

PULLED A BIG DATA PACKAGE OUT OF THE HUB-- E.V.I.L.'S STILL SIFTING THAT.

BUT THE FACILITY'S SEISMIC SENSORS JUST STARTED SINGING A GODSDAMNED **OPERA**. LOOKS LIKE OUR WORMY FRIENDS ARE BACK, AND THEY BROUGHT THEIR SIBLINGS.

IT HAS ONLY BEEN FOUR MINUTES AND TEN SECONDS. THIS IS ***NOT***--

ARM UP. HAP: PLOT AN EXFIL ROUTE AND RALLY POINT, JUST IN CASE.

WE'LL NEED TO GO BACK OUT TO DRAW THEM INTO A CROSSFIRE.

SPOTTER RELAY: "HELLSHOCK" AMMUNITION ENABLED. REQUIRE AN ELEVATED POSITION FOR PROPER DEPLOYMENT.

WHOA, OKAY... THESE SCHEMATICS ARE...WEIRD, UNLIKE ***ANY*** TERRAFORMING FACILITY I'VE SEEN BEFORE.

THERE'S SOME SORT OF SHIELDED ***HARDPOINT*** THREE LEVELS DOWN, SPRAWL 82. NO IDEA WHAT IT'S FOR, BUT IT'S IDEAL FOR A FALLBACK.

THAT'LL DO. WE'LL RETREAT THERE AND HOLD POSITION UNTIL AN ***EVAC*** REACHES US.

JO, YOU'RE STAYING PUT, REAR SECURITY. PROTECT THE CASSANDRA ***AT ALL COSTS.***

WHAT?! YOU'RE SHITTING ME!

THAT'S AN ORDER, JO.

THIS ***SUCKS.***

I WOULDN'T WORRY. THEY WILL BE BACK SHORTLY.

THE GOLD CRATE IS FOR YOU, BY THE WAY.

...THE HELL?

TRUST ME...

"...YOU'LL BE GLAD FOR IT LATER."

HARPO, TAKE HIGH GROUND AND START MARKING TARGETS. HAP, SEAL THAT DOOR BEHIND US.

EVERYONE ELSE, FAN OUT...

...I HAVE AN IDEA.

TARGETING MODE: ACTIVE.

ENEMIES MARKED AND UPLOADED TO ALL SUIT SYSTEMS. NEAREST CONCENTRATION IS MARKED RED-ONE.

SO, SPEAKING AS A COMBAT ENGINEER, I PREFER PLANS TO IDEAS.

OH, I DO HAVE A PLAN. PITY JO ISN'T HERE TO HATE IT.

WE'RE GONNA RING THE FUCKIN' DINNER BELL.

SO...MORE A *NOTION* THAN A *PLAN?*

STOP BEING CUTE. LET'S GET TO WORK.

FORGED! WEAPONS FREE!

HAP, PUSHER, GO TO *SEISMICS*, HERD THEM WEST. ANY SQUIRTERS BREAK FREE, TAKE 'EM OUT.

AFFIRMATIVE. COUPLE'A THUMPERS, COMING RIGHT UP.

BA-WHHHHAAAAAAAAAOW

SKEEEK

SKEEK

SKEEEK

YOU'RE ON, HARPO.

KLIK

FWEEEEE

SKREEEEE

FFFZZZZ

SPOTTER RELAY: IMPACT.

SPPPLLLLLTCCCCH

THEY'RE BUNCHED UP--

--HIT 'EM!

SKEEEK?!

...HUH. ALL VITALS IN THE GREEN. NO INJURIES.

NOT GONNA LIE, THAT WENT ***WAY*** BETTER THAN I THOUGHT IT WOULD.

IT SURE DID.

HARPO: WHAT'RE THEY DOING?

RELAY: ENEMY HAS FALLEN BACK, HOLDING APPROXIMATELY 9.7 KILOMETERS WEST OF OUR POSITION.

POSSIBLE THEY ARE REGROUPING, BUT THEIR BEHAVIOR IS…ERRATIC.

SKEK?
SKEEK
SKEEEK
SKEEEEK
SKEEEEEK
SKEEEEEEEEEE

GET TO HAVE **ALL** THE FUN WHERE'S **MY** PAYBACK JUST MY FUCKIN' **ARM**

CRAZYJO.

WHAT? HUH? **WHAT?**

GET THE **DOOR.** IT WILL **STICK.**

HAP! THE DAMN **DOOR'S** STICKING!

FORTY-SEVEN SECONDS.

NHHNN

NO SURPRISE, THE ENVIRONMENT'S PLAYING MERRY HELL WITH **ALL** THE EQUIPMENT.

THANKS, JO.

VICTORY, ATTEND, PLEASE...

...YOU AND YOUR FORGED NEED TO GATHER ALL YOUR EQUIPMENT AND STAND ***HERE.***

QUICKLY, PLEASE. WE HAVE ***EIGHTEEN*** SECONDS.

SPOTTER RELAY: THE FUCK?

AT THE ***DOUBLE,*** FORGED.

TWELVE SECONDS.

PREP FOR CLOSE-QUARTERS, BOX FORMATION ON THE CASS.

SEVEN...

...SIX...

...PUSHER, ONE STEP TO YOUR LEFT, PLEASE...

...THANK YOU, THREE...

...TWO...

...ONE...

TWNNGG

WEAPONS FREE--

FUU--

GET BACK YOU GODS-DAMNED--

NO! LET IT SPEAK!

WH-AAAT-T-T-T-T...

...ARRRR H-H-H-H...

...TOOOOOO...

...WHSSSSS?

NOOO...

...NOO...

...NO...

...MIND...NO MIND...NO MIND W-WORTH...

...KNOWING.

PRIMITIVE BARBARIC PESTILENCE.

DESTRUCTIVE CORRUPTIVE INFECTIVE.

NAMED HAVE YOU BEEN.

FEAR US.

FUCK THAT, YOU--

SHUT UP, JO.

SEVENTY-THREE SECONDS FROM NOW, SAVE ME.

WE CAME.

YOU MUST.

BEG.

ENTREAT.

PLEAD.

TO WHAT END?

THE MERCY OF QUICK ANNIHILATION...

...FOR WE SUFFER NOT YOU TO EXIST.

TOO LONG WE ABIDED INSECTS/ MICROBES/IRRITANTS IN OUR SIGHT.

AFFRONT AND INSULT OVER AND OVER, BUT IGNORANT WE THOUGHT.

NO MORE.

NOW WE PUNISH.

ALL WILL BE PUNISHED.

ALL WILL SUFFER.

ALL WILL DIE.

WE RECOGNIZE YOU AS INTELLIGENT, SENTIENT, EVOLVED BEINGS.

WE ASK TO BE RECOGNIZED AS THE SAME.

WAIT-A-FUCKING-***WHAT?***

THIS IS FIRST FUCKING CONTACT? TEN ***THOUSAND*** YEARS OF COLONIZATION AND EXPLORATION...

...AND ***THIS*** MOTHERFUCKER IS THEIR AMBASSADOR?

DOESN'T BODE WELL FOR A PEACEFUL ***FUTURE.***

CAN IT, HAP.

SURELY A PEACE CAN BE BROKERED?

NO RECOGNITION.

YOU CLAIM INTELLIGENCE NOT MANIFEST.

ACTIONS WITHOUT CONSEQUENCE.

NOW CONSEQUENCE FOR ACTION.

YOUR EMPIRE ENDS--

--NOW--

--NOW--

NNNHHHAAA--

--MOTHER-
FUCKER MOVE
MOVE MOVE--

--FALL BACK!

FUCKING FUCKING FUCKING-FUCKS!

JO, COME ON!

IGNORANCE.

CLOSE IT! FUCKING CLOSE IT, HAP!

YOU CANNOT ESCAPE US.

KHTHUNNNG

RELOAD.

GIMME SECURITY, I WANT TO CHECK VIC'S ARMOR.

WHAT THE HELL *WERE* THOSE THINGS?

IN SEVENTEEN SECONDS, SIX PORTALS WILL OPEN IN THIS SPACE.

UNLESS WE MOVE, WE WILL BE CUT APART IN THE ENSUING CROSSFIRE.

INTEGRITY'S HOLDING BUT YOU'RE LEAKING THE GOOD STUFF...

...GONNA NEED A QUICKPATCH OR--

LATER, HAP.

WE'RE MAKING FOR THE *RALLY POINT.*

HARPO, ON POINT.
HOW'S OUR SIX?
GODSDAMNED LIGHT-SHOW BACK THERE--
--PEST- BASTARDS ARE QUICK!
TO YOUR *RIGHT*, FIFTY-TWO DEGREES--
--IN TWO SECONDS--
--THANK YOU, JO--
GOT MORE OF THEM--
--THREE O'CLOCK!
FUCKING HELL THEY JUST KEEP COMING!

AMBIENT ENERGY SURGE AT MINUS 8 DEGREES, 17.

AMBIENT ENERGY SURGE AT 9 DEGREES, 112.

AMBIENT ENERGY SURGE AT 75 DEGREES, 210.

SPOTTER RELAY:

WHERE THE FUCK ARE THESE THINGS COMING FROM?

AMBIENT ENERGY SURGE AT MINUS 29 DEGREES, 151.

SPOTTER RELAY:

WHAT'S THE GODSDAMNED PLAN, BOSS?

E.V.I.L., WHERE'S THAT RALLY POINT?

THAT RALLY POINT IS SEVENTY-THREE-POINT-FIVE METERS Z-AXIS THIS POSITION.

WE HAVE TO JUMP.

JO, GRAB OUR GIRLFRIEND AND GO!

HARPO, YOU'RE WITH THEM!

ROGER THAT--

--HOLD ON!

HAP, YOU'RE NEXT!

AYE!

YOU'RE UP, PUSH.

BOSS--

IT'S A FUCKING ORDER, PUSHER! I'LL BE RIGHT BEHIND YOU!

COME ON COME ON COME ON--

--E.V.I.L., FIRE ALL NUTCRACKERS ON MY WORD.

WARNING: RELEASE OF--

OVERRIDE--

VRRRR

VRRRR

--NOW.

MAX DETONATION.

WARNING: MAX--

E.V.I.L.!

DETONATING.

BOOM

WHHRRRR-KLK
KA-CLAK

EVERYBODY RELOAD, AND MAKE A WALL AROUND THE CASSANDRA.

THEY'LL BE BACK.

WE MUST MAKE THE MOST OF THIS RESPITE.

THERE'S A PATH THROUGH THIS, BUT THERE'S SOMETHING I MUST DO.

DANGER: HIGH ENERGY EMITTERS IN USE

THAT WHICH MUST HAPPEN MUST HAPPEN, VICTORY.

...DO IT.

BETTER LET ME LOOK AT THAT DAMAGE, BOSS.

ON THE HUSTLE, HAP. DON'T THINK WE'VE GOT MUCH LONGER.

DANGER: HIGH ENERGY
EMITTERS IN USE

ONE HANDY-DANDY EMERGENCY SUIT PATCH...

FWSSSSSH

THERE YOU GO. IT'S SET. WON'T TAKE TOO MUCH OF A POUNDING, BUT IT SHOULD KEEP YOU 'TIL I CAN GET REPLACEMENT PLATING.

KRNSH

...WHAT IS THIS PLACE? OUR BRIEFING SAID THIS WAS A TERRAFORMING FACILITY. THIS LOOK LIKE A TERRAFORMING MECHANISM TO YOU?

NOW THAT YOU MENTION IT, NO. AND WHY BURY A TERRAFORMER WAY THE FUCK DOWN HERE?

IT'S A T-SPACE ENGINE.

ONE MOMENT. I NEED TO ACTIVATE IT.

...ACTIVATE IT?

THERE'S A PLAN, VICTORY. ADMITTEDLY A BAD ONE, BUT A PLAN NONETHELESS.

...I HAVE *QUESTIONS* NOW.

ONE: WHY ARE WE TURNING ON A FUSION-POWERED STARSHIP ENGINE THAT'S BURIED UNDERGROUND, AND TWO: WHY ARE WE STANDING ON THE FUCKING THING WHEN WE DO IT?

TO BUY US THE TIME WE NEED TO ESCAPE.

WE USE T-SPACE TO PUSH OUR SHIPS TO FASTER-THAN-LIGHT SPEEDS. IT IS A VIOLENT, ENERGY-INTENSIVE, AND DIRTY PROCESS.

OUR ENEMY IS ***NATIVE*** TO T-SPACE. THEY MOVE THROUGH IT LIKE WE MOVE THROUGH AIR.

THE GENERATORS HERE SHOULD THROW OFF ENOUGH DISTORTION TO PUT THEM OFF OUR SCENT FOR A FEW MOMENTS.

A VERY FEW.

BUT WHY IS THIS EVEN HERE? WHY INSTALL A STARSHIP DRIVE DOWN *HERE?*

I THINK I KNOW WHY, BOSS.

AL-ASHANTI BUILT THIS DUMP. AL-ASHANTI ISN'T IN THE TERRAFORMING BUSINESS, THOUGH. IT'S A MINING OPERATION.

GET TO THE POINT, HAP.

MINES GENERATE WASTE. AND WASTE REQUIRES STORAGE OR DISPOSAL. BOTH ARE HAZARDOUS OR EXPENSIVE OR BOTH.

SOMEONE GOT THE BRIGHT IDEA OF DUMPING THEIR WASTE DIRECTLY INTO T-SPACE. IT'S THE ONLY REASON TO BUILD THIS DOWN HERE.

60s

IF SOME-ONE DUMPED PILES OF TOXIC SHIT IN MY BARRACKS, I'D BE HELLACIOUSLY PISSED, TOO.

SO IF WE'RE LIGHTING THIS FIRECRACKER... WHAT'S NEXT?

CRAZYJO HANDS ME THE ITEM I ENTRUSTED TO HER. THE ONE I SAID WAS VERY IMPORTANT, AND THAT SHE'D BE HAPPY TO HAVE.

WHAT IS IT, ANYWAY? WHAT'S SO IMPORTANT ABOUT IT?

I AM UNDER-DRESSED FOR OUR JOURNEY.

EXPERIMENTAL THRONEWORLD TECH I...LIBERATED FOR THIS OCCASION.

BA-DEEP

IDEALLY, IT SHOULD PROTECT ME AS WELL AS YOUR ARMOR DOES, FOR A TIME.

I COULD KNOCK YOU AROUND TO TEST IT OUT IF YOU WANT.

A LITTLE WHITE LIE, JO. MY APOLOGIES.

WHO BETTER THAN YOU TO KEEP IT SAFE AND MAKE SURE IT WAS AVAILABLE WHEN THE TIME CAME?

ALERT. MULTIPLE AMBIENT ENERGY SURGES AT PLUS 8, 36 DEGREES, PLUS 8.2, 38 DEGREES, PLUS--

THERE'S NO MORE TIME. IF THE PLAN IS TO SUCCEED, EVERYTHING MUST HAPPEN AT PRECISELY THE CORRECT MOMENT.

...UNDERSTOOD. AWAITING ORDERS, MILADY.

SPOT, HIGHLIGHT TARGET! POWER COUPLING BUFFER C-32D2055, JUNCTION D-19.

HARPO, FIRE ANTI-MATERIEL ROUND ON MY SIGNAL.

TARGET ACQUIRED. AWAITING GO ORDER.

17 S

NOT YET.

ALERT. ADDITIONAL AMBIENT ENERGY SURGES DETECTED. RELAY: AM I CLEAR TO FIRE?

NOT YET NOT YET ***NOT YET***

NOW!

8:

AS WAYS TO GET KILLED GO...

GO! GO! GO!

...THIS AIN'T BAD.

STATUS!

COMMUNICATIONS NOT POSSIBLE IN T-SPACE. WEAPONS OFFLINE. ALL SYSTEMS ARE AT 10% EFFICIENCY.

ENEMY CONTACTS AT 180 DEGREES, ANGLE 2.

ENEMY CONTACTS CLOSING.

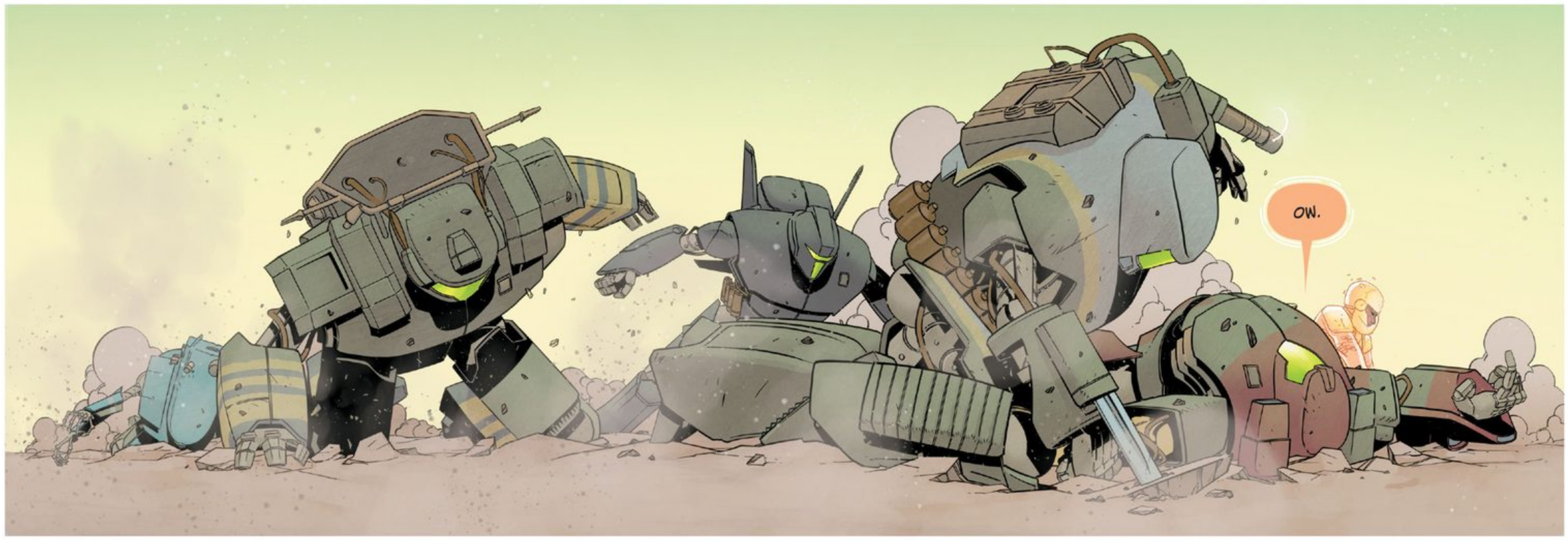
FFFFFFFFUCK

WARNING.
BLAST WAVE INCOMING.
BRACE. BRACE.

ALERT. BLAST WAVE IMPACT
IMMINENT. SURVIVAL
PROBABILITY: LOW.

BRACE.

--TAKE ALL YOU
MOTHERFUCKERS
WITH ME--


OW.

HALT!

IDENTIFY YOURSELVES IMMEDIATELY!

YOU THINK HE'S GOT ENOUGH FEATHERS?

QUIET.

I THINK WE'RE IN *REAL* TROUBLE NOW.

...INTERESTING.

HERE IS SOMETHING WE ARE UNACCUSTOMED TO...

THE SHINING PALACE OF THE FOREVER EMPRESS

...A FORGED TEAM COMING TO SEE THEIR EMPRESS. UNUSUAL, INDEED...

APEX CITY, THRONEWORLD PRIME, SECTOR ZERO

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 74-C]

available genetic source material and the risks inherent in obtaining such a sample given the proximity and protections afforded the subject of the analysis. As per instruction, all such planning has been conducted at the designated remove of SITE: HARLEQUIN with attendant black-box safeties imposed on those staff engaged in mission planning.

As you had predicted, there is simply no reasonable means of mounting an operation to obtain viable samples. Every conceivable acquisition requires some HUMINT operative interaction, and thus runs the same risks; they will be detected and neutralized, which is not to say fatally, but rather rendered incapable of proceeding to mission objective and/or success. Further, such exposure risks compromise of not only the operation but of this office's position in seeking to mount the same.

Again, we return to the foundational question: what *exactly* are their capabilities and capacities? What limitations exist upon those capabilities and capacities? What methodologies exist to neutralize the same?

I assert, again, that the omnipotent capacities of the targets of this investigation are exaggerated, simply because common sense demands such. They cannot be all-knowing. They cannot be all-seeing.

Most crucially, they cannot be all of one mind.

To clarify the last point: while we have ample evidence to believe that there is a collective mind-state (for lack of a better word) that the targets share to communicate and engage in colloquy, there manifestly must be differences of opinion that arise from subjective interpretation of their visions. It is evident, if only from observation, that a consensus view between the subjects of this investigation is somehow agreed upon through said colloquy; this consensus is then presented to their designated Voice (though how that Voice is determined, and how often that speaker changes, also remains a mystery); that the Voice to this consensus then presents their findings to the Eternal.

But this must, definitionally, mean that there are individual dissenters within this collective. That, simply, there are those amongst the subjects who do not agree with their peers.

Operationally, it is proposed that an attempt be made to determine those in dissent, for it is reasonable to expect that such dissent would arise more than once, and likely from the same source. If multiple sources exist, there could, in theory, be a minority cabal that survives within the collective, and depending on the size and strength of that cabal, might be leveraged for further insight and intel into the processes and capabilities of the whole.

Of course, any such efforts on our part would have to be initiated with the utmost subtlety, and without any overt action on our part. Even the slightest hint of interest from this office could have catastrophic consequences.

This leads, inevitably, to our final conclusion: they may already know, despite all of our best efforts, what we are doing; worse, we may already be compromised. All our attempts to safeguard against this may also be compromised. It is all well and good to subject our teams to regular brainscan and analysis to determine evidence of modification or tampering, but if, in the final analysis, even that information can be misinterpreted through psychic manipulation, we would again have no way of knowing. Thus it is possible that the subjects or even a single subject can alter our own perception of the information we are receiving, and thus manipulating us to their desired result.

With this in mind, I urge you again to continue pursuing SITE: COPPERVALE's countermeasure project. It is my considered opinion that this may be our only defense against such manipulation. While I recognize your hesitance at engaging in such direct tampering ourselves, if confined to short-term memory alone, it should allow for strategic planning and discussion without ongoing deleterious effects, despite the results from the test subjects that we are now seeing.

CAPACITIES AND CAPABILITIES

The collective is possessed of strong precognitive abilities, apparently augmented by their proximity to one another, though that last is speculated and unconfirmed. Whether this is the result of somehow managing to interpret non-collapsing quantum wave function input into probable collapse-output or another method entirely is unknown. Accuracy in the near-term is exceptionally high for such prediction, with 100% correct results in anticipation of events in near-seconds dropping only marginally to 98% within a minute; the drop-off continues at a marginal decline, as best as can be determined, within three days of foreseen events.

Long-range temporal prediction remains an unknown, as we have no reliable data with which to interpret results. Given the fall-off of near-second to near-minute to days, some subjects are likely tasked to focus their abilities entirely or almost entirely on determining the probability of events deemed vital, for whatever reason. And again, such predictive ability may vary from subject to subject, and rise and fall amongst the collective.

The collective has demonstrated the ability to engage in direct mind-to-mind contact, and has great facility at penetrating surface thoughts to extract information. Deep extraction apparently requires physical contact of some sort (see **Appendix C: *Modes of Dress and Culture of Sexualization*** for further thoughts on this); physical contact also appears required in cases of behavioral modification. Behavioral modification, for the purposes of this investigation, also includes selective editing and manufacture of memories and/or thoughts.

There is no evidence at this time of telekinetic ability, or any similarly associated skills (psychokinesis, pyrokinesis, levitation, materialization, or healing). These abilities cannot be discounted, however; due to the mythology and propaganda surrounding the subjects over the last several millennia, it is simply impossible to effectively separate fact from fiction.

One further point which continues to frustrate our investigations: given the genetic source of the subjects, questions continue to arise as to how it is that the progenitor Herself has not demonstrated any of these abilities, both confirmed and speculated. An exhaustive search of historical records provides no insight into this whatsoever; there is simply no record of Her demonstrating any of the aforementioned psychic abilities, as far back as the Bloodraise of 438. Certainly, it is possible that such references have been edited/removed, but Historical Analysis has found no evidence of such.

This is puzzling in the extreme, given Her stature and importance. The opposite would be expected; that there would be—arguably *should be*—countless stories, even if all apocryphal, of Her days of battle, of Her striking the Jerall Horde down with a look, or Her reducing Bekker-090 to rubble with Her voice.

Further investigation on this matter is recommended.

Bureau of Data Collection and Analysis
Operational Subgroup TUSK 9-F
Davian, Analysis Task Force

E.V.I.L. SPEAKS

__SESSION BEGINS__

This issue marks the conclusion of the first story arc of THE FORGED [Codenamed OPERATION: BLACK BOX]; the trade paperback collection will release on September 6th, 2023, followed by the launch of the next arc with issue #4 on September 27.

This unit is gratified by the outpouring of support for Scimitar-3. Initiating question-and-answer algorithm. As always, queries should be sent via Permaweb to:

__ForgedAskEvil@gmail.com__

Please mark any queries as "OK TO PRINT"; this unit reserves the right to edit queries for length, clarity, and/or accuracy.

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Embed scansequence to same follows:

MESSAGE BEGINS

Dear Greg, Mike and Eric [and E.V.I.L.],

Military science fiction isn't my proverbial reading material of choice. Such stories often struck me as being too much in love with the neat uniforms or things that go bang or zap. But because Greg and Eric were scripting this series, I figured it wouldn't be the same old same old "might makes right" pulp romance.

And the first issue of **THE FORGED** turned out to be something different. Hats off to Greg and Eric for however many arms they had to twist at Image to let them tell their story in this oversized format. Not only do I get the feel of flipping through the pages of a literal galaxies-spanning story, the price point feels justified instead of feeling chosen to extract the most money from the addicted reader.

I don't have any problems with this being a "laying the groundwork" issue as this universe sounds incredibly detailed and I the reader need to get accustomed to it. Fortunately, your lead characters are a group of women who look like the product of US Navy SEALs who drink daily steroid-and-crack smoothies and have individual personalities to match. Uh, do I really want to know just how much of a snooty smartass the team sharpshooter is?

But since the two of you haven't shown all your story cards yet, here are some questions that I hope you and E.V.I.L. can answer:

1. If Victory's Forged squad is supposed to operate in the field without the infrastructure associated with present-day military forces, how do they handle arming the resupply issue when they run low on bullets or other lethal instruments?

FORGED FS3-0 (Warname: "Hap") wears armor that contains a fast-fabrication unit that shapes collapsible metamaterial into a variety of equipment and ammunition on demand. Coupled with the natural ingenuity and tenacity of FORGED troopers, each member of the team is herself a highly lethal weapon either in or out of armor. On rare occasions where ammunition is exhausted before combat has ended, FORGED teams are still

extremely combat-effective.

In addition, Naval procedures exist for orbital resupply drops to mainline infantry forces; FORGED teams, often deployed to target locations with Naval vessels in support, can request resupply on an as-needed/priority basis.

2. If Victory and the Cassandra both carry the Empress's genetic material, does this mean Victory or the Empress will eventually transform into whatever [probably hostile] tentacled creature the reader sees on the first issue's cover or briefly on the bridge?

No data currently exists to support this theory.

3. Assuming there was no black box to recover in reality and this whole mission is a set-up, the question is what's the goal? To fake the death of Victory's squad? To have them "accidentally" die on an "ass-end of nowhere" planet before they realize they know something they really shouldn't know?

No data currently exists to support a conspiracy of this nature; perhaps a Loyalty and Indoctrination Officer should be assigned to monitor this correspondent.

4. Was naming the A.I. "E.V.I.L." intended to sow distrust in the A.I. user so they can avoid being paralyzed at a crucial moment if the A.I. decides it's in a "let's conquer the Empress's empire" mood? For that matter, is E.V.I.L.'s secret name I.C.H. (I Conquer Humanoids)?

There is no historical precedent for a rogue artificial intelligence working against Her Eternal Majesty. There have been incidences of an A.I. [redacted] but such reports are likely spurious. This unit recommends that correspondent refrain from such considerations.

5. The gym confrontation between Victory and one of the ship's officers had me wondering about this society's classism towards the Forged. Given that they're the Empress's elite troops, shouldn't they be accorded a little more respect than hi-tech cannon fodder? Or is this prejudice a society-wide attitude?

This unit's observations have yielded some, if not definitive, at least compelling theories in regard to baseline human behavior/s. On numerous occasions (including the incident you cite), officers' and troops' reactions to FORGED operators is almost universally respectful. However, much of that respect appears to stem from fear; this unit has determined that much of what humanity does not understand generates a fear-based prejudicial response. While suboptimal, there has been no detectable loss of efficiency or effectiveness on the part of FORGED operators; rather, such attitudes and behaviors frequently correspond to reduced performance on the part of non-FORGED personnel.

6. Just how many hundreds (if not thousands) of Forged units are there?

[Alert] Security clearance required for access to Imperial military personnel records.

While this unit is unable to provide specific information, the following should provide acceptable data to satisfy correspondent's query: There are **enough.**

Looking forward to the next issue and hoping none of Victory's team winds up doing their best crepe suzette impression.

–Peter Wong

Thank you for your queries, Citizen Wong.

Additionally, there have been several submissions of visual data of canine fauna [subref: dog pics]. This unit is most gratified. To date, all such images show worthy and loyal companions and, while not fully supported by hard data, one can draw the conclusion that the future of the Empire is indeed secure.

E.V.I.L. Likes dogs. If you are aware of a dog of whom E.V.I.L. would approve, please submit nomination information including image and brief explanation for evaluation. Notate submissions as "OK TO PRINT."

SUBJECT: Izzy (a.k.a. Busy)

This subject, Izzy [see prior page] was submitted for consideration, citing her ability to "rearrange a room in 6.7 seconds" and her codename [assigned due to such activity], "Busy." Though submitter suggests Izzy is a usage case to refrain from purchasing a canine from a gas station parking lot, evidence indicates **no negative impact** of such activity.

This following dog is named Shadow. "He is a smart boy who enjoys LARPing as a person because their access to numnums is way less regimented." This unit is unacquainted with "LARPing" but maintains that Shadow's access to "numnums" should be unrestricted.

SUBJECT: Shadow

The following dog's designation is "Princess Marceline Spaghetti *last name redacted*" [aka: Marcie]. Her ancestors were accomplished boar hunters. She prefers naps. This unit has determined that, due to her lineage and classified nomenclature, she is a fitting companion for FORGED troops.

SUBJECT: Princess Marceline Spaghetti

These are worthy canines.

There were several submissions worthy of inclusion; they may appear at a later date.

__SESSION ENDS__

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